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**THE AESTHETICS OF ZONING—
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS**

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The Aesthetics of Zoning--Social and Economic Aspects

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This bibliography was prepared in partial fulfillment of the requirements for participation in the Law Library Institute Emphasizing the Effects of the Information Explosion on the Law and Services to the Disadvantaged. The Institute was held at the School of Library and Information Science, the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee from May 19 to June 13, 1969 under a grant offered under Title II, Part B, Higher Education Act of 1965, Public Law 89-329 as amended.

The subject of the bibliography was suggested by Norman Marcus, Counsel for the New York City Department of City Planning and by the Director and Faculty of the Institute, Roy M. Mersky, J. Myron Jacobstein, and Albert P. Blaustein.

During the four weeks of the Institute one of the subjects touched on was the place of the librarian in the academic community and in the research process. It is within this frame of reference that the phrase "resident scholar" is mentioned as a descriptive term.

PREFACE

In considering the relationship between the aesthetics of zoning and the problem of poverty I have tried to keep in mind two recent zoning decisions in New York City. Lincoln Square is an example of zoning to maintain a style of architecture that is currently considered desirable (Plazas Nice for Strollers) for a district educational and cultural in character where the continued maintenance of this style is considered of importance to the future economic life of the city. The zoning recommendations include such features as galleries and covered plazas in return for bonuses in higher densities to builders who would apply these amenities. Shrewd "metropolis watchers" insisted on the same design requirements and the same bonus for future low and middle-income housing in that area. While it is doubtful that such bonuses would be of much interest to builders of other than luxury housing, it was in effect a way of insisting that the lower economic group be zoned into the area.

The St. Marks Place case is an instance where the low income group could not be zoned out. It is a convenient location and suitable for luxury housing that would yield a higher tax revenue. The zoning request for increasing the density allowed to permit the building of high-rise apartments was rejected due to the efforts of "metropolis watchers" among professional planners who insisted that the zoning change did not provide for the low and middle-income residents of the neighborhood who would not be able to afford the greater housing costs.

The Lincoln Square area can easily be recognized as a zoning decision involving those amenities usually considered as being of an aesthetic nature. St. Marks Place is less easily identified as being of aesthetic value. It

is my own interpretation that the underlying social considerations of familiarity, preservation of the environment, and the security of identification with a place are as important for aesthetic satisfaction as the elegant or the fashionable.

I may be accused of projecting a personal aesthetic of zoning. This is perhaps unavoidable. In matters of taste you are on your own. There are no aestheticians, no aestheticists, no aesthetes, listed in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. There appears to be instead a pronounced reluctance for anyone to assume the position of authority in this field. It is in fact a highly appropriate subject for a "resident scholar" to investigate.

Since I share the general timidity with regard to establishing my personal preference as the standard of taste I have avoided the title "An Aesthetic of Zoning."

Urbanization and Aesthetics

Aesthetic awareness is a particularly urban phenomenon. It can be best described by the story of the Italian immigrant who's drinking habits changed with the degree of his urbanization from Italian red wine to beer, to hard liquor, cocktails and fine vintage wines, until at the peak of his successful urbanization he built a replica of the Italian farm house he had known and served his guests dinners that featured spaghetti and Italian red wine.

Taste and aesthetic judgement is a part of man's impulse to society (Kant). With increasing urbanization comes an increasing range of choices and an opportunity for decisions and value judgements. The Italian red wine at the beginning was the object of limited choice and necessity, at the end it carried a value of selection.

Like economics aesthetic preference moves from the urban to the rural areas (Jacobs). Billboards lining the country roads were introduced by urban entrepreneurs and they were removed in response to a changing urban aesthetic. Agricultural zoning was introduced by urbanites desirous of retaining some of the open space of the countryside, it was destroyed by urbanites looking for rural homesites (Whyte).

It would appear that in the past wealth alone created an opportunity for the expression of taste and the exercise of preference.

Aesthetics and Aestheticians

Few words are so greatly in need of redefinition as the word "aesthetics". Its origin rests on philosophic grounds. It is a system for determining the meaning in the confused data derived from the sense perceptions (Baumgarten). Philosophers dealing with this particular branch of epistemology are engaged in devising systems, or structures of ideas for identifying the content of confused data, (Doxiades, Kepes, Langer, McLuhan). They are not aestheticians.

Planners, when they talk to each other, talk about "a way of deciding and acting", (Webber), about attitudinal and technological change and possible

points of stability in the social and economic structure. They are interested in the methods and potentials of predicting change (Jouvenel), and the relationship between planning and the political process (Bzesinski). They discuss how best to serve the consumer group they represent (Equalop, Housing and Planning News, Nichols). They do not seem to desire the role of aestheticians.

"Metropolis watchers"¹ is probably the group that would best describe the functioning of aestheticians in relation to the urbanization process. The categories of "metropolis watchers" that Reh fuss identifies come from both the consumer group and the purveyors of services. They all come from the same social and economic stratum of society and they all assume the stance of consumers of the urbanized product. That Reh fuss has chosen to analyze the dissatisfaction expressed in this consumer perception is a part of the economic reality. We do not flood the market with good mouse traps but build better ones by listening to the complaints and eliminating the competition.

Current research into the data of sense perception continues to reaffirm earlier findings that aesthetic preference is a cultural phenomenon (Holland), dependent upon familiarity, and on social and educational differences, on psychological factors due to individual differences (Farnsworth, Miller, Miner, Pervis).

Forms of aesthetic approval are difficult to identify, (Hayakawa), they are subject to reinterpretation, (Baker, Fowler), they are often mischievous, (Brien, Reissman), and dependent on a mood of excitement (Gaertner); nor is the professional in the business of guiding the urbanization of society likely to find any more useful affirmative response among his fellow professionals (Elliott, Arnold).

Aesthetics of Zoning

Zoning has become the standard method of guiding the efficient use of land and of controlling the height, area, and use of buildings. As a corollary to this statement the theory of zoning includes justification of its purpose by declaring the intention of promoting the health, safety, and welfare of the inhabitants (Makielski). All these factors, height, area, use, health, safety, and welfare, enter into the judgement of the aesthetic value of a zoning decision.

A zoning study is built around terms like, convenience, and economic efficiency (San Francisco Dept. of City Planning). Zoning specialists look to urban designers to create a pleasant environment as a result of good design (Huxtable July 6, 1969). A member of the New York Planning Commission talks about requiring "concept design" from the urban designers (McQuade).

Design deals with arrangement of space and with size, form, texture, and color. Visual effects are considerably altered when people begin using the designed spaces (Eckbo) and when they bring their equipment into them (Ritter). Ways of arranging space and designing the urban landscape would seem to be dependent on the nature of the immediate present. What was possible for Olmsted (Fein) is not possible nor even desirable for the present (Halprin).

1. Reh fuss, John A. "Metropolitan Government, Four Views," Urban Affairs Quarterly.

In the face of contemporary requirements for "concept design" urban designers respond by asking to be told something about the latent values and goals of their clients, and the nature of the society of the future (Gutman). They respond by presenting their portfolios (Lucie-Smith, Museum of Modern Art) or they may respond by speaking of aesthetic characteristics in a vocabulary that desperately asks for the services of an epistemologist (Regional Plan Association).

A zoning resolution is built around terms like, preservation, protection, improvement, promotion (New York City Planning Commission) and it is to these effective terms that "metropolis watchers" respond.

Aesthetics and Poverty

The squatters who were displaced when it was decided to build Central Park rioted in protest. Their protests did not have any effect, they did not halt the building of the park. The squatters who objected to the building of a state office building in the Harlem had more influence.² The zoning of Fifth Avenue in 1916 was concerned with the aesthetic preferences of the lady shoppers who came to the area. There was no need to consider the aesthetic preferences of the loft workers who were the cause of the zoning restrictions. Their representation among the "metropolis watchers" was not an important consideration.³

Poverty has long been a fact of urban existence (Smith, Weber), so has the recognition that poverty is not aesthetically acceptable (White). Both urbanization and poverty seem to be equally hard to accept as a permanent condition rather than a temporary problem (Willmann, Lubov). Recent research into the nature of poverty (Glazer and Moynihan, Lewis, Rainwater) suggests that the culture of poverty has its own dynamics and its own character (Aston).

Experiments in developing "metropolis watchers" among the poor themselves have been efforts to apply sociological theory in practice (Brager and Purcell, Weissman). These experiments have had some interesting results but they have not resulted in any smartening up of the premises that would make poverty more acceptable, nor have they produced "metropolis watchers" who would satisfy the maximum feasible participation of the poor required for federal funding of renewal programs.

The "metropolis watchers" who do find the poor their special clients are apt to be politicians (Carroll, Compromise Set on Zoning...) who see politics as an extension of planning and planners who see planning as an extension of politics (Arnold). To both the poor provide a market for their services which while it may be non-profit is not necessarily without compensation for the politically oriented.

Conclusions

While poverty has long been an element of urban centers its urbanization

2. Housing and Planning News

3. Makielski

has been long and slow in developing. Cities still have a smaller share of the nation's poor than of the nation's population.⁴ It is only within the last thirty years that the culture of poverty has received attention as a stable feature of the urban environment which may change but which may never be eliminated. Increasingly the population at the poverty level has become the consumer of some highly specialized and expensive services. In a consumer culture the competition for this market is sharp and becoming increasingly competitive. As a consumer group the poor find themselves in a position of being able to command some sophisticated methods of making their needs known and the rapidity with which these methods are being applied is extremely disturbing. In the past the tool of action available to the poor has been rejection and protest. However, practitioners in the business of guiding the urbanization of society need some positive guidance on which to base recommendations. Aesthetics itself is a highly controversial subject. The aesthetics of poverty is almost unexplored territory. A group of "metropolis watchers" representative of the poor is still to be developed. The methods identifying affirmative aesthetic expression are still to be discovered.

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